

Lannette Linthicum

Top M.D. Gives Blood, Sweat And Tears to Profession

By Gabriella Daley Klatt

In 1986, Dr. Lannette Linthicum was sent to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) by the U.S. Public Health Service, National Health Services Corps. as part of a four-year commitment she made to federal service in exchange for the government's help with medical school. Linthicum, a native of Baltimore, was the oldest of five children and excelled in school. She earned a scholarship to the prestigious preparatory high school Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. Linthicum also received an academic scholarship to Smith College in Massachusetts, where she majored in both French language and literature and biochemistry. Up until her sophomore year in college, she had planned to teach. "I was always into the arts and literature, and I found that I had some interest in science as well," she said. "So as I started to take biology courses and classes like organic chemistry, it really made me come alive."

"I always knew that I wanted to help people, and I felt like I could help more people by being a physician than I could by being a teacher," Linthicum said. "I realized that part of being a physician is being a teacher because you have to teach your patients how to take care of themselves." Linthicum attended the University of Maryland School of Medicine. She never expected that after graduating, the National Health Services Corps. would send her to work in a prison system far from home.

At the time, the TDCJ health care delivery system was in trouble. Years earlier, a federal judge presiding over the Ruiz prison reform lawsuit had declared nearly the entire medical program inadequate. "I was extremely apprehensive about working in a correctional environment," she said. "In fact, I was very apprehensive about being sent to Texas. I didn't know anything about Texas. I didn't know a single person."

It was a difficult time and even though Linthicum could have left TDCJ in 1990, she stayed because the final judgment had not yet been negotiated. Linthicum was asked by the health

care administration to stay until there was a consent decree. "It was like there was light at the end of the tunnel, but we weren't quite there," she said.

Linthicum feels that the offenders — more than 150,000 state prisoners — are her patients, and they are counting on her to advocate for their needs. "Everything we do in the Health Services Division is related to advocacy for our patients," she stated. The Bible quotation "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity as being yourselves also in the body" has sustained and guided Linthicum during her years of service. "It's sort of been my mantra. Whenever I was discouraged, I would look at that and get renewed."

The medical program was released from the lawsuit in 1992. However, TDCJ's mental health services program was not released until two years later. By then, the agency was converting to its current correctional managed health care system in which medical services are provided to the offender population through contracts with the University of Texas Medical Branch and the Texas Tech School of Medicine. Linthicum stayed on to help smooth the transition from one system to another. She thought once that transition was complete she might finally return to Baltimore and open an inner city clinic. Instead, Linthicum stayed in Texas realizing that the community she wanted to serve was in the prison system. "It was the same people that would be in the inner city. I also had an overwhelming feeling that this population deserved to have well-trained, competent physicians to take good care of them," she said.

In fact, Linthicum said, it was a ruling in a Texas case heard by the U.S. Supreme Court that exclusively guarantees prisoners the right to health care. "Because of that case, prisoners are the only class in the United States with a constitutional right to health care," she said. "Prisoners have a right to access care, they have a right to a professional judgment and they have a right to receive care that is ordered."

Best in the Business



Linthicum, who started at TDCJ as a staff physician at the Huntsville "Walls" Unit, was named director of the Health Services Division in 1998. She is a certified internist by the American Board of Internal Medicine and, in 2003, was named a fellow of the American College of Physicians, the premier organization for internists in the country. Linthicum has been a member of the American Correctional Association since 2000, serving on several committees as well as the Commission on Accreditation for Corrections and the Health Care Certification Task Force. TDCJ Executive Director Brad Livingston said, "Dr. Linthicum's reputation as a criminal justice health care professional, along with her honesty and integrity, serve the agency and state well. I could not ask for a more knowledgeable, supportive and engaged director."

"In the 20 years I have been in Texas, I have given my all — blood, sweat and tears," Linthicum stated. "And I know in my heart that I have done some good ... that I have positively contributed to this health care system and saved the lives of several offenders. When I came here, we had a broken system. Now, we probably are the premier health care system in the country in correctional medicine. I'm proud of that."

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